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ABSTRACT

Two national studies hae recently confirmed that specific kinds of educational experiences provided for children by both parents and teachers, from preschool through high school, can make a significant difference in their reading ability as young adults. Both studies analyzed data gathered from 3,959 high school students in 24 school districts across the United States. The Kindergarten Reading Follow-up (KRF) study examined long-term effects on children of being taught to read in kindergarten. The Reading Development Follow-up (RDF) study sought to identify specific kinds of experience that fosters high levels of reading achievement in high school seniors. The results of these two policy studies provide parents, educators, and policy makers with some straightforward guidelines for cultivating literacy development. The implications are clear: students who are provided with more of these specific kinds of experiences across their development will have higher reading achievement levels as young adults than those who have less. (RS)

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Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills EDO-CS-92-01

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# Prescription for Literacy: Providing Critical Educational Experiences

*by Donna Farrell Siegel and Ralph A. Hanson*

Specific kinds of educational experiences provided for children by both parents and teachers, from preschool through high school, can make a significant difference in their reading ability as young adults. Two national studies have recently confirmed the particular home, school, and extracurricular experiences that impact an individual's reading achievement over the course of development. These studies analyzed comprehensive data gathered from 3,959 high school students in 24 school districts across the U.S. The first study, the Kindergarten Reading Follow-up (KRF) Study, examined the long-term effects on children of being taught to read in kindergarten (Hanson and Siegel, 1988; 1991). The second study, the Reading Development Follow-up (RDF) Study, analyzed the same data to identify the specific kinds of experience, from preschool through high school, that foster high levels of reading achievement in high school seniors (Siegel, 1987). The results of these two policy studies provide parents, educators, and policy makers with some straightforward guidelines for cultivating literacy development. The implications are quite clear: students who are provided with more of these specific kinds of experiences across their development will have higher reading achievement levels as young adults than those who have less.

## Early Educational Experiences

Early language and educational experiences for children were found to be particularly critical to adult literacy levels. Although early childhood experiences have long been known to be important in terms of general intellectual development, the RDF Study confirmed that the specific kinds of early educational experiences students have are highly predictive of later reading abilities as well. That is, those high school seniors who were provided with more reading, language, and other kinds of both direct and indirect educational experiences during their preschool years had higher overall levels of reading competency than those provided with less. Such preschool activities as learning nursery rhymes and stories, watching Sesame Street, playing word and number games, being read to, attending nursery/preschool, and participating in special lessons such as swimming, dance, or music were all positively related to students' reading ability in high school. Finally, later "high stakes" schooling experiences, such as placement in remedial/developmental classes and/or a particular type of high school academic track, could be linked to the students' level of involvement in early educational experiences.

## Early Reading Instruction

Children who learn to read early, either indirectly through home and family experiences, or directly through formal beginning reading programs implemented in preschools and kindergartens, are typically good readers in the primary grades (Mason, 1987). Until recently, however, it was unclear as to whether this advantage was maintained through high school. The findings of the KRF Study now provide some resolve to this age-old debate (Hanson and Siegel, 1988; 1991). The results of this study clearly indicated that those students who began their formal reading instruction in kindergarten had higher reading achievement scores, both at the end of their kindergarten year *and* as seniors in high school, than those students who did not. Also, compared to other high school seniors in the same school districts, those who received the kindergarten reading instruction had better grades, attendance, and attitudes toward reading, as well as less need for remediation. More importantly, these same results held up across ethnic, gender, and social class groups. Perhaps the most astounding finding was that those students in the study who were provided with formal reading instruction in kindergarten were, as a group, from *lower* social class backgrounds than those students who were not; yet, they scored *higher* on all indicators of educational achievement as high school seniors than their higher SES peers who attended elementary schools in the same districts.

## Elementary Schooling Experiences

In regard to elementary schooling experiences in general, the RDF Study (Siegel, 1987; 1990) found that those students who participated in activities and classes with an academic emphasis, and avoided remedial classes and/or repeating grades, had higher achievement levels than those who did not. The more classes and situations in which students participated that had an academic and/or accelerated emphasis (including

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skipping a grade or double promotion), as opposed to a non-academic and/or remedial or developmental emphasis, the higher their reading achievement was in their senior year of high school. More specifically, those students who spent more time in writing stories or papers, doing math problems, reading books, working on science projects, and/or working on spelling and language lessons had good school attendance records and high levels of reading achievement.

## Secondary Experiences

At the secondary schooling level, those students who spent more time in organized extracurricular activities such as academic clubs, athletic teams, student government, band, and/or special lessons, had higher reading achievement scores as seniors than those who spent more time in unorganized extracurricular activities such as watching TV, talking on the phone, or hanging out at the mall. Also, the students who were programmed through an academic track, as opposed to a vocational track, and/or those who took more than one year of high school math, science, and foreign language courses had better reading skills at the end of their senior year of high school than those who did not. Finally, those students who spent less time working in part-time jobs, paid or unpaid, had better reading skills than students who worked more.

## Parental Involvement and Support

Specific experiences provided by parents, at every schooling level (i.e., pre through high school), were clearly related to adult literacy levels. Results indicated that if parents expect their children to become literate adults, then they must provide guidelines for their behavior and encourage participation in reading and reading related activities, at least through high school. For example, having rules concerning the student's bedtime, household chores, and/or homework, along with giving rewards for school work, providing books and magazines, and taking the student to the library, museum, and concerts, were all shown to contribute to the level of a student's high school reading achievement. Moreover, parental expectations in regard to students' educational attainment are extremely important. The students who did well in school, and/or indicated that they wanted to continue their education beyond high school, had parents or guardians who expected them to do so, and provided them with the necessary support and encouragement.

## Implications

The findings of both the Reading Development Follow-up Study and the Kindergarten Reading Follow-up Study emphasize the responsibility of parents, educators, and policy makers in regard to literacy development: to offer, encourage, and support activities that provide these kinds of experiences and require the use of such skills for students at every schooling level. Early childhood learning experiences, however, are particularly important to literacy development. The finding that early childhood educational experiences, and early reading instruction in particular, are key factors in the reading competency level of high school seniors strongly suggests that *all* children should be given the opportunity to attend high quality preschools and kindergartens that would provide them with these experiences (Siegel and Hanson, 1991).

Information and research documenting the long-term benefits for children of being provided with such experiences first began to appear in the late 1960s and has continued to build since then, nationally as well as internationally (Teale, 1980; Durkin, 1987). Today, however, the vast majority of preschool children *are not* provided with these kinds of early educational experiences; yet, amazingly, educational leaders and national policy makers seem puzzled as to why so many students graduate from high school as functional illiterates.

If our nation's schools are going to have any impact on future literacy rates, then clearly *all* children must be given the opportunity to attend full-day preschools and kindergartens that would provide them with beginning reading instruction and related educational experiences now known to be critical to literacy development. Furthermore, school districts and policy makers must also be ready to present new and compelling evidence for *not* providing early childhood teachers with valid programs that would enable them to teach the appropriate language and beginning reading skills to students in their preschool and kindergarten classes.

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